

Wondered How Tomorrow Could Ever Follow Today by osaki_nana_707

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Summary:

There's a reunion at the Byers' house.

(chapter one is from Billy's perspective, chapter two is Steve's.)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

please read the other fics in the series or this one won't make sense. thanks! :)

Wondered How Tomorrow Could Ever Follow Today

Billy stares at the ceiling fan rotating lazily above him. Katie's still sleeping, snuggled up next to him on the fold-out bed since Max is sleeping in the bedroom, and he's got his arm draped around her. She's warm and soft and quiet like the morning around him, but Billy's buzzing with apprehension.

He hadn't planned on going to Steve and his friends' little get together for obvious reasons, but Katie wants desperately to go because she wants to see Dustin again, and Billy can't ask Max to watch her for him because things between him and Max are tentative at best and he really doesn't want to fuck that up. Besides, he really doesn't want to spend Sunday all by himself. He got the Camaro running relatively smoothly yesterday afternoon when he was avoiding Max, so he's pretty sure he'll either start smoking or start climbing the walls if he's left to his own devices.

One of Katie's friend's moms had given him her phone number last week. He supposes he could have called her, gone out on a date. God knows it's been months (and months and months and... holy shit, *years*) since he's hooked up with anyone, and if he can't have one vice he should at least be allowed another, but... fuck. He doesn't want her. He knows he doesn't want her, isn't sure he can even get it up for her.

He grimaces, swallows hard. He knows what he wants, but it's Off Limits. It's the one boundary for himself he's managed to keep, and he's been doing so well. Nothing but women. Not after that one time he got caught... and the one time in the car on Parents' Day, but that doesn't *technically* count because they didn't--

He doesn't let himself finish that thought. He scrubs a hand over his face to try and wipe it away.

"You know, no matter what anyone told you, it's nothing to be ashamed of," Steve had said that day, like it was so easy. Like the very idea of giving in to that desire doesn't mutilate Billy's insides. Billy thinks it's so funny, so fucking hilarious, that people used to say he was completely out of control. The amount of restraint he's shown around Steve Harrington is *ungodly*. Since the first time he laid eyes on him in high school, he's *wanted* so badly that his fingers itched and his stomach dropped and his palms perspired. It drove him mad and then it *made* him mad because anger was the only safe emotion. Anger was so easy back then. He didn't care about the consequences because ultimately the hammer only came down on him and that was fine. His dad was going to beat the shit out of him anyways, so he figured he might as well have fun on his spiral down to oblivion.

Still, there was a line he wouldn't cross, not after the first time. Not after Max had caught him in his room with some guy he barely knew with his head between the guy's legs. Not after she'd screamed out of shock and his dad had thundered in and dragged him to his feet by his hair. Not after his forehead had made contact with his dresser and he was asked the million-dollar question.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Billy closes his eyes to the memory, but it still replays on his eyelids, a hazy movie on repeat.

He doesn't cross the line. Not after his dad called him a faggot, and not after his dad dragged him out to a nowhere town where he couldn't see the ocean anymore.

He doesn't cross the line even with his demon dead and buried.

Because he's a fucking coward.

Because he's already worked so hard to be *normal*.

Because he doesn't deserve...

His vision blurs the image of the ceiling fan. He blinks a few times to

dispel it and exhales slowly.

It's so funny, Billy thinks. It's not funny at all.

He's committed to going to this get together at the very same house where he beat the shit out of Steve ten years ago. He knows he's not welcome there. Max had looked at him like he'd grown a second head when he asked, actually *asked* if they could come along. He offered to drive and she looked all the more aghast, even though she's driving a shitty rental car. She'd never actually given him an answer. Maybe her look was answer enough. He'd offered up a feeble, "Steve invited me," and that was that.

He really hoped she wouldn't ask Steve if he'd actually invited him. Billy's poker face is good, but he knows Steve's not really the type to lie. He really can't afford to get kicked out of Max's house right now.

He glances towards the window, staring out at the lavender sky of the early morning. Katie shifts at his side, her face pressing closer into him, arm draping over his waist. He runs his fingers through her tangled blonde hair.

He doesn't cross the line.

Because he can't disappoint her.

--

After about an hour Billy can hear Max moving around in her room, so he gets up and leaves Katie to sleep while he closes himself up in the only bathroom. He knows he could have showered earlier since he's just been lying there until now, but...

"Hey, asshole," Max says through the door, knocking on it. "I was about to use the shower."

"Sorry," he says, turning on the shower. "I mean, unless you don't care that I'm naked, you're gonna have to wait your turn." He takes off his shirt and his boxers so it doesn't make a complete liar out of him. "And don't say asshole."

Max gives the door a loud smack, but she doesn't argue with him

further. He can hear her mumbling for a moment before her voice fades down the hall and her bedroom door slams. He kind of wants to stick his head out and tell her to keep it down because Katie's still sleeping, but that would give her an opening to get in the bathroom and leave him standing naked in the hall. Besides, they both already know Katie could sleep through an earthquake once she was asleep. She *has* , in fact, slept through earthquakes.

He takes a cold shower because he's still keyed up from his earlier thoughts. Every time he thinks he's shut them off, they come crawling back, and he hates it. It leaves him feeling clammy and unsteady like he's coming down with some sort of disease. He can't smoke it out anymore, so he just tries to wash it off. It mostly works. Mostly.

He takes his time shaving and styling his hair, and it's only partially to irritate Max by keeping her out of the bathroom for longer. He doesn't know why he thinks looking nice, smelling nice will make anyone find him more welcome at their nerdy little shindig, but it at least can't *hurt* . Dustin wasn't exactly friendly with him, but they'd tolerated one another. Maybe it'll work out. He feels like Steve will at least come to bat for him anyway, and the shitbirds tended to look up to him as their hero, King Steve, or at least they did back in the day. Hopefully, they'll listen to him.

Billy's stomach twists. He feels nausea creeping in. God, he's nervous, he's actually *nervous* about coming face to face with a bunch of stupid *kids* . He wants to go back to the time where he didn't care about them or what they thought. It doesn't take long for him to realize he still doesn't. It's just that he cares very much what *Steve* thinks.

He brushes his teeth to dispel the familiar taste of bile in the back of his throat.

When he comes into the kitchen, Max has fixed cereal for herself and Katie. He can tell she deliberately *didn't* fix any for him, but the joke's on her because he's pretty sure he can't eat right now or he'll vomit. "Shower's all yours," he says with the biting pleasantry of a sore winner. She glares at him over her bowl of Froot Loops.

Billy leans over and kisses the top of Katie's head, then goes to fix

coffee.

“Don’t you look nice today?” Max says, slightly sarcastic. She can be bitter if she wants, but Billy knows he looks good.

“I always look nice,” Billy says, digging a mug out of the cabinet.

“I’m almost positive that you don’t.”

“I’m handsome and you know it. Your girl friends would be crazy about me, or at least they would be if you had any girl friends.”

“I have girl friends,” Max says, then looks away. She mutters it under her breath, but he still hears it. “Doesn’t sound like it’d be my *girl* friends that you’d be interested in.”

Billy sets the mug down on the counter harder than he strictly needs to. “You say something, Maxine?” he asks, and he hates the way it burns inside him. He hates the way his hands want to shake, the way he wants to rage until he burns out because this sick feeling is too much to bear. She knows, he knows she knows, she’s always known, but if she doesn’t say anything it’s so much easier to pretend she doesn’t. She used to be too afraid of him to be so defiant, but now she knows he’s not as strong as he pretends to be, and she knows exactly where to fucking cut him open.

“Not a thing, William,” she replies easily and crams a spoonful of cereal in her mouth.

Billy fantasizes picking up the mug and throwing it against the wall, revels in the idea of her flinch at the loud noise and the close proximity to her face. He has to clench his fists on the counter to keep from doing it, has to breathe his way out of it because he can’t do this in front of Katie. He’s trying to be better, he’s *trying* --

He pours a cup of coffee and promptly leaves the kitchen. He goes out to the front step and sits there and sips at his coffee and hates himself, fucking *hates himself* .

He’s out there for maybe twenty minutes before he starts to calm down, and just when he thinks he can breathe again, he hears the front door open and watches as Max sits down next to him on the

step. He stares at her, but she just looks out at the street, sipping at her own cup of coffee.

“Good coffee,” she says after a beat.

“Why did you come out here?” he asks.

She hesitates, bites down on her bottom lip as she stares down into her cup. Then, she says, “I baited you. I was pissed off, so I was acting like an asshole... I’m... sorry.”

Billy’s first instinct is to bark out a laugh and say something cruel. He’s been learning to fight that instinct. “So, you were an asshole,” he says, shrugging a shoulder. “I’m an asshole too, so you don’t have to apologize.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to be like *you*,” she snaps, then clamps her mouth shut when she thinks she’s said the wrong thing.

He manages a mirthless smile. “Yeah,” he says, lifting his mug to his lips. “I don’t wanna be like me either.”

Max’s shoulders sink slightly. She doesn’t seem to know what to say.

“When’s the thing start?” Billy asks, changing the subject.

“You’re still gonna come, huh,” she says softly. It doesn’t have the bite to it that her previous words have had.

“Don’t have much else to do,” he says.

She looks like she wants to say something. What she does say isn’t what she wants to say.

“Can you drive me?”

He blinks slowly, looking at the driveway. “Sure,” he says easily.

“Thanks.”

They finish their coffee in silence. After that, they go back in and Billy brushes Katie’s hair while Max takes a shower. He gets her

dressed and lets her watch television until Max is ready to go.

He's going to survive this. Probably.

--

There are cars already parked outside of the Byers' residence when Billy's Camaro comes roaring up. It's around ten, so it's still early, but apparently, the nerds start partying early. He thinks maybe some of them might have been here since yesterday.

The house looks different ten years later and in the daylight. It's more obviously rundown, though great care has been taken to keep it together. Billy struggles to see it in the present though. He just feels the buzz of adrenaline that settled in ten years ago, just remembers Steve standing on the porch with his hands on his hips. He'd said it sardonically, "*Am I dreaming or is that you, Harrington?*" but he'd meant it. It didn't feel real, seeing him standing there, finally giving Billy his undivided attention. Billy had been needy, desperate for Steve to look his way. He'd wanted to see Steve *burn* because Billy was absolutely turning to ash. He was at the end of his wick, but Steve's fire was so righteous and so bright, like a phoenix rising from the dust. He couldn't touch him, not the way he wanted, but he could pick a fight. It was the closest he thought he'd ever get...

Then he'd let it devour him, and he'd beaten him unconscious. He might have even killed him if he hadn't been stopped. The memory of it makes Billy's skin crawl, makes him feel frozen to the core. For a moment the hands gripping the steering wheel are bruised and smudged with blood. He blinks and it's gone, but the tremor of his heart is very much still there.

He doesn't want to do this. He wants to haul ass out of here away from that memory, but he can't.

He looks at the line of cars parked in the yard. One of them is Steve's Accord, and Billy's not sure if he feels relieved or mortified. He wonders if Steve thought of that night when he parked here. He's not sure he actually wants to know the answer.

"You just gonna sit there?"

Billy jolts, turns to the passenger seat where Max is sitting, one leg out of the open door. She stares at him with her eyebrows raised until he shuts the car off and gets out. Katie climbs out of the backseat and falls into step next to him, reaching up and taking his hand. He knows she has no idea why he's uncomfortable, but the effort puts him at ease all the same.

Max goes ahead of them into the house, doesn't knock before swinging open the screen door and waltzing in like she owns the place. Billy can't say much since, in the past, he's been known to charge into wherever he pleases, but he does know his dad would have kicked his ass if he behaved that way in front of any adults.

...but Max is an adult, he reminds himself. She's not the same stupid kid she was back then. It's odd because he feels like he very much still is the same stupid kid. Still, he's not about to be shown up by her, so he takes the steps up onto the porch and swings back the door and walks inside with his shoulders squared, a challenge in his eyes for anyone who dared to tell him he couldn't. Just like he did all those years ago.

His stomach twists, and he squeezes Katie's hand a little harder.

No one really seems to notice he's there once he's inside, thankfully, because Max's crew of nerds are too busy sitting around the coffee table arguing over some sort of game. Hannah sits on one side of Dustin, smiling, trying to follow what it is they're saying even though it's clear she's not participating, just watching. The nerds are taller now, all limbs and deep voices, but they seem the same as they did back when they had to ride their bikes everywhere. Billy never did get to know Max's friends very well, but he does recognize them. Dustin, of course, he's seen, and Lucas too, at least in pictures with Max back at her house. He vaguely recognizes the dark-haired one as... Mike? He's pretty sure his name is Mike. He's Nancy Wheeler's little brother, he knows that much. He's a tall, gangly thing, and his hair hangs long. Next to him is a frail-looking man with his legs folded up like a fawn in a patch of grass. His hair is shaved short, and his face is youthful, but his eyes are old. It's hard for Billy to look at him too long, at whatever unseen thing hangs on him. It's kind of like whatever it is that hangs on Steve, but this kid's thing is heavier. In fact, a slow glance around the room makes him realize they all have

something hanging on them in one form or another, even Max. He doesn't know why he didn't see it before.

What is it though?

Katie lets go of his hand and goes bounding forward to the table, launching herself onto Dustin who only manages to notice her just in time to keep himself from getting bowled over. He's surprised to see her, but when he finally looks up and sees Billy still standing there in the doorway he's even more surprised. Suddenly, all eyes are on him, and the coffee table is silent, and Billy needs to leave right now. He needs to leave. Oh, God, he needs to *leave* --

Lucas whispers something to Max. Billy can catch enough of it to know he asked, "*What is he doing here?*"

"Steve invited him," Max says. They all look at Max and Billy uses that opportunity to get away, slipping into the kitchen and out of the awkward air.

Steve is in the kitchen, thank God. Billy's less grateful for the other familiar faces of Jonathan Byers and Nancy who are sitting at the table with him, drinking orange juice and looking over what appears to be a portfolio of photographs. Steve's saying something about getting Jonathan to take some pictures of Hannah for him. There's a woman at the stove who's cooking hash browns and toasting waffles, her shoulder-length graying hair tied back in a ponytail at the base of her neck. There's a radio in the window above the sink that's playing music softly.

"This one's my favorite," Nancy says, pointing to a photo that Billy can't see from the doorway.

"It's beautiful," Steve agrees, a smile spreading across his face.

Billy hates that his first thought is *he's beautiful* . Steve notices him right then and for a moment Billy's heart seizes in a panic because he's suddenly uncertain if he said that out loud.

"Hey," Steve says, eyes big and wide and soft. Jonathan and Nancy look up too, and again Billy feels the dread he'd felt in the living

room at the sight of him. No one wants him here, he knows, but it still hurts. It hurts way more than it should.

“Hey,” he says casually. All he can see every time he blinks is the plate he grabbed from that sink and smashed over the back of Steve’s head.

The woman at the stove turns and smiles at him. “Oh!” she says. “I thought at first that you were Hopper. Have we met before?”

“That’s Billy Hargrove,” Jonathan says slowly, a little gobsmacked. The woman, Jonathan’s mother Billy is assuming, doesn’t seem to know him. It’s kind of nice, if he’s being honest.

“He--” Nancy starts, but Steve interrupts.

“He’s a friend of mine. I invited him.”

Billy turns to Steve. They share a Look. Apparently, Steve’s more willing to lie than Billy gave him credit for.

Knowing Steve has his back loosens the stiffness in Billy’s shoulders and from there it’s easy to turn on the charm. He smiles at Jonathan’s mother because she’s the only one he can make a first impression on and he says, “Our daughters play together. They’re basically inseparable.”

“I’ve heard,” she says, smiling back. “Steve has told me all about Miss Katie, and Hop’s told me about you too.”

Billy’s heart jumps again, but she soothes his worries quickly by adding on, “he says you’re a hard worker down at the station and not afraid to do a little heavy lifting.”

“Uh-- I um, y-yeah,” he stammers. He actually *stammers* like some small kid being complimented. He manages a glance at Steve who is just smiling, and Billy’s heart squeezes a little.

“I’m Joyce,” Joyce says, extending her hand, and Billy shakes it and hopes his palms aren’t sweating. “I’m making some breakfast for everyone if you want some. It’s not quite ready yet, but we’ve got juice and coffee. We’re still waiting on a couple of folks but feel free

to make yourself at home, Billy.”

Her gaze is soft like Steve’s. Soft like Billy’s mom’s gaze. Billy feels softer too.

He pulls up a chair next to Steve because he’d rather take the judgmental stare of Steve’s ex-girlfriend than the multiple ones from all of Max’s weird friends, but he finds there is no judgment to be found. It’s awkward, yes, but... Nancy *smiles* at him.

“How have you been?” she asks, hand settling on the slight roundness of her stomach. She apparently is Nancy Byers now, according to the ring on her finger.

“Um... fine,” Billy manages, and it’s still awkward. He used to be smoother than this. He’s way out of practice, he thinks.

“Didn’t think you’d come back to Hawkins,” Jonathan says. He doesn’t have the bowl cut that he used to. He looks like he sleeps better too and can afford nicer things. Apparently, he’s found some success. Considering how quick as a whip Nancy was in school, he doubts Jonathan is the only breadwinner.

“Funny how things work out,” Billy says. He doesn’t want to tell them he was so pathetic that even his step-sister felt sorry enough for him to throw him a bone. Steve sits among them as well-off and successful. Billy’s at least going to play the part. “Where are you staying at these days, Byers?”

“New York,” Jonathan says. “I went to school there and it’s just kind of home for us now.” He takes Nancy’s hand and squeezes it. It’s saccharine. It’s stupid.

Billy can’t stop staring at Steve’s hands on the table.

“Steve said you’re working at the police station now,” Nancy says. “Hopper’s not too hard on you, is he?” She grins.

Billy swallows. He realizes with sudden clarity that Steve has talked to them about him. This shouldn’t be weird, of course, because it isn’t odd for Steve to tell them about what’s going on in his life (and thus Billy’s part in it)... but...

There it is again. The piece of him that knows he doesn't deserve to be Steve's friend, to be Steve's *anything* .

He forces on an easy smile and tries not to think about it. "Hop's not any harder on me than I am on him, trust me. I can handle him."

"He's a big ol' teddy bear anyway," Joyce says from behind him, and he finds her sitting a mug of coffee down in front of him without him asking for any. He doesn't know how she knows he prefers coffee over orange juice, but she just gives him a little wink as if to say *a mother always knows* .

Billy's heart squeezes again.

"So, uh," Billy says, picking up the mug just to have something to do with his hands, "what's with this meeting anyway? How does everyone know each other?"

There's the awkward silence again, but this time they're looking at Steve, silently trying to drag out how much he's told Billy. Steve is sweating a little when he says, "Small towns, you know? You kind of make your family. Since all the kids were always going all over the place, we all ended up uh... becoming closer friends, all of us."

It's a bullshit answer. Billy sees it all over his face.

"Makes sense," he says anyway, nodding, and everyone seems relieved that he believes them, even though he absolutely doesn't. He's already treading water, after all. He can wait to get answers.

--

Joyce is just finishing breakfast when Hopper shows up. The nerds are playing Dungeons and Dragons. Hannah and Katie had tried to pay attention, but they'd both gotten bored and are coloring with some art supplies that Will happened to have on him (he's apparently an artist or something). Hopper gives Billy a tilt of his chin in greeting, and he smiles when he sees Joyce. Billy looks at Steve and points his finger at the two of them and waggles it side to side as if to say *them* ? Steve grins and ducks his head and doesn't say anything, but the doe-eyed gaze Joyce gives Hopper right back is enough of an

answer. Billy files away the information for later. He doesn't have much arsenal to use against Hopper, so he'll take what he can get.

"Is Jane coming?" Joyce asks as she hands Hopper a plate first and starts fixing more plates. Hopper immediately puts his plate down on the table and starts helping her fix the plates.

"She's hard to keep in touch with, but I want to say that her answer was yes. I'm not sure where she's coming from this week. Last week she was in Louisiana but that's the last I heard from her."

Billy remembers the name *Jane*. He's not sure where at first... but then he recalls a few separate occasions Hop had used it. Jane is his daughter. The one that is alive.

"Well, I've made plenty of Eggos for her," Joyce says. "Hopefully she's not running too far behind."

"Hargrove," Hopper greets curtly, even though he's already acknowledged his presence. "Didn't expect to see you here, but I assumed you would be when I saw the car out front."

"Seems I'm just the big surprise nobody wants," Billy says, grinning, and pretends it doesn't hurt.

"Oh, hush," Joyce says. "You're just as bad as Steve."

"Oh, am I?" Billy asks, raising an eyebrow. "In what way?"

Joyce hands Billy a plate. "The self-deprecation. There's too much negativity. I think I'm gonna ban it in my house. Besides, you two boys are much more handsome when you smile."

Steve is eating up the attention like a starving man. Billy wants to, but he just isn't totally sure what to do with it.

"Handsome is fine but useful is better," Hopper says grumpily. "Why don't you kids help distribute breakfast, huh?"

Everyone jumps up then and starts taking plates out to the living room where the game is still commencing. Billy gives the two plates he's been handed to Max and to Katie, content to interact with the

others as little as possible. He's not sure if they're actually staring at him or if it's all in his head, but it still makes him uncomfortable.

He's just about to head back into the safety of the kitchen when the front door swings open again. Billy's wondering how many of these little shits there actually are, but then he just kind of... pauses.

It's a woman in the doorway, but that doesn't really begin to describe her. She's tall with short hair, feminine yet masculine, young yet old. Otherworldly. Unknown. Beautiful... and honestly kind of terrifying. She stands there with her neutral expression, somehow managing to look into the eyes of everyone in the room at once and have them captivated. Billy feels like she can see right into the very deepest, darkest corners of his soul, and it leaves him breathless. It's like a car accident. It's like Katie's first smile. He can't look away.

"El!" Mike Wheeler cries as he jumps to his feet first and makes it across the living room in three quick strides. The boy is so smitten with her that it radiates off of him instantly, and Billy just watches as he wraps his arms around her and holds her like she's the only thing keeping him grounded to the earth.

"Mike," she breathes, and her eyes fall closed, and the spell is broken. She seems normal, human. Billy's arm hair is still standing on end, his flesh covered in goosebumps. She's just a girl, a girl named El apparently, a girl in a leather jacket, but Billy doesn't feel confident in the reality he's been presented. It's not enough information. It's a lie.

"I didn't know if you were gonna make it," Mike says when he can finally bear to part from her. El touches the side of Mike's face, thumb sliding against his cheekbone before she cards a hand through his hair.

"Long," she says.

"Yeah," he laughs. "Will keeps making fun of me. I keep forgetting to go get it cut."

"I like it," she says. "Pretty." She smiles at him. Mike would die for her, it's clear. It does something to Billy's insides, makes them twist

and knot unpleasantly. It doesn't take him long to identify the feeling-- jealousy.

He looks away only to find Steve's appeared by his side, and his heart leaps into his throat, and he can't breathe because he's so *close* and he *wants* .

He's going crazy. That's all there is to it.

"That's Jane," Steve says, answering a question that Billy didn't ask.

"Jane" has moved to the circle of nerds, all of them essentially talking at once. She stands there and listens and her expression doesn't change. It appears she's having no trouble following each line of every story.

"She's fucking unreal," Billy whispers before he can help himself.

Steve smiles. "You have no idea."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

He doesn't answer. He just goes to the group and starts complaining at them, clapping his hands and telling them about how hard Joyce worked to make them breakfast so they shouldn't put their plates on the floor. Apparently his dadliness is amplified around all these nerds. Billy leans back against the wall and just watches.

He watches and watches...

He watches until he realizes he's not the only one standing there.

It's Joyce, and Billy's stomach twists tighter when she lets her eyes trail between Steve and him. She doesn't say anything though, just hands him his plate. "Sorry if the eggs are a little runny," she says. "They're usually okay if you put a little pepper on them."

"Thanks, Ms. Byers," he croaks, feeling sweat beading on the back of his neck. Did she see something? Did she think anything?

"I'm glad you're in Steve's life," she says suddenly, and Billy clutches the plate in his hands a little tighter. "He's been really lonely, I know.

He's not very good at reaching out to people. I was the same way after my divorce, I guess... Just dedicated myself to my kids and didn't live for myself at all. I still don't know how to do it." She laughs. Billy isn't sure why he feels like crying.

"Anyway," she continues, smiling up at him. "I think it's been good for him. *You've* been good for him."

It's Billy's turn to laugh, but it has no humor in it. "I've never been good for anyone," he says.

She jabs a finger in his side. "Hey, now, no negativity here, alright? I banned it, remember?"

Billy doesn't know what it is about her that makes him say, "Sorry," but he does. He thinks maybe she just reminds him of...

She reaches up and pats him on the shoulder and goes back to the kitchen. Billy wants to tell her that she really doesn't know him very well, and she certainly doesn't know *Steve* well, if she thinks Billy has anything to do with Steve being a good person.

He doesn't say anything.

--

The weird ass non-family reunion goes into full swing after breakfast. There's a lot of talking, a lot of stories. The girls start a game of Hide and Seek that everyone gets roped into. Hannah is "It", so Billy plays too because he can't resist her big, sad eyes any more than he can resist Steve's, which is why he's holed up in a coat closet that smells strongly of mothballs. It's kind of nice, he thinks. Quiet. Away from judging, prying eyes. All he can hear is the muffled movements of other people through the house, and the distant sound of Hannah counting as loudly as she can so that everyone will know when she's done. He closes his eyes and sinks back against the hanging coats.

Then, the door opens and shuts. He can still hear Hannah counting, so he knows it's not her. He opens his eyes but can't see in the darkness. The smell is familiar though-- the shampoo or fabric softener or whatever is familiar.

“Get your own hiding place, Steve. I was here first,” Billy complains and hears the rustle of fabric as Steve startles. He must have thrown himself in here pretty fast to not notice Billy standing right there, he thinks.

Steve shifts again. He’s breathing softly. He’s so close to him, and Billy wants to reach out and touch. He doesn’t dare. What he does dare to do is answer the unasked question. “I know your smell by now, fuck, don’t act so surprised.”

Billy can sort of make out the eyes staring at him in the darkness as his eyes adjust.

Hannah has stopped counting.

“I just...” Billy finds himself saying before he can stop himself. “I... I think about it. Sometimes. I just... like it, the uh... cologne or whatever.”

He hates himself the moment he says it because it feels too close to a confession. Something as simple as admiring the scent makes him feel backed into a corner, and he wants to take it back or turn it into a joke. Something. Anything.

The eyes watching him in the dark widen. The mouth opens as if to speak.

The door opens, and Hannah announces, “I found you!”

Will Byers just stares back at Billy, lips parted slightly as the information he’s been given marines.

He *knows* .

Fuck.

--

The next several hours are blur. Billy kind of sits on the sidelines and pretends to be listening whenever anyone talks to him (which isn’t often), and he lets it settle that Will Byers *knows* . Billy keeps making eye contact with him throughout the night, searching for the moment

when Will lets it spill, but so far it hasn't come to pass.

They've put together a fire pit in the backyard. Billy sits by the house away from it, watching Steve and Max help Katie and Hannah make s'mores. Steve is wearing a crown of flowers that Hannah has made for him from the little yellow dandelions in the grass. Dustin's dragged out a guitar from somewhere, and he and Lucas are arguing over how to play it while Dustin struggles through the intro of "Smoke on the Water". Mike and Jane (or "El" which they call her for some reason) are sitting with Will and Joyce and Hopper. Mike is animatedly telling them about the comic book he and Will are apparently trying to get published. Billy had only heard pieces of it discussed throughout the night, but it sounds like it's about a young boy who gets dragged into an alternate world by a monster, escapes, and has to find his way back home with the help of a girl in that same dimension who has supernatural powers. Jonathan and Nancy are just sitting nearby, Nancy's head pillowed on Jonathan's shoulder, talking in hushed tones.

Billy doesn't belong here.

He leans his head against the side of the house and tries to pretend that this fact that he already knows doesn't make him *ache*. God, why had he even come here? He could have asked Steve to bring Katie. He would have done it. Billy knows the answer though, knows that it's because he's fucking weak, he's a fucking mess, he just wants to see Steve whenever he can and play like he's a part of this. Like he's something. Like he's someone.

He drops his face into his hands. It's this feeling he hates the most, he thinks, the feeling of being an outsider. He would think he'd be used to it by now-- feeling different from everyone else, feeling scared and helpless... Yet, it still crushes him. It still makes him feel ten inches tall. It was so easy to puff up and get angry, to burn. It made him feel powerful and strong... but he's softer now, softer because Katie deserves someone soft, and he's not good enough, but he's all she's got.

There's a sound next to him. He lifts his head and finds that Will Byers has come over and sat next to him, pulling his knees up, crossing his legs at the ankles. "You want a cigarette?" he asks. His

voice is soft, kind.

"I'm not allowed," Billy says, voice gravelly, like he's been screaming.

"I talked to Hop," Will says, holding one out to him. "He says he'll let it slide this time."

Billy doesn't know if that's true, but he takes it. He lights it. Breathing in the smoke grounds him, makes him feel less shaky. "Jesus-fucking-Christ," he exhales.

Will's mouth curves up in a small smile. "You're welcome," he says, even though the 'thank you' was only implied. "It uh... it just looked like you were having kind of a rough time over here away from everyone."

Billy looks out across the yard rather than at Will. "I'm fine," he says. It's almost true now that he's got a cigarette.

"Yeah," Will says, nodding.

Silence floats between them for a moment or two.

"I'm sorry for invading your hiding space earlier," Will says. He must see the way Billy stiffens, but he shoves on bravely. He's so fucking brave, Billy thinks. "I guess Steve and I do use the same cologne."

Billy looks at Steve right as he bites into a s'more, chocolate and marshmallow smearing at the corner of his mouth. Fuck.

"What I said--" Billy starts, ready to try and turn it around, make an excuse, even though he essentially has no plan.

"It's okay," Will interrupts. "I... I get it. I'm not gonna tell anyone if that's what you're trying to avoid."

Billy looks at him. So thin, so soft, so brave. "Why?" he asks. "I mean... your nerdy friends hate my guts, and with good reason. Why wouldn't you give them an arsenal to fight back against me with?"

Will's brows lower in confusion. "Because..." he says slowly, choosing his words carefully. "Because you're... not fighting us. I

mean, you've been pretty cool since you got here. I think they were kind of nervous when you showed up, but you haven't made fun of any of us, and you've helped out a lot. You helped my mom wash the dishes. You helped Jonathan and Hopper build the fire pit. You played Hide and Seek. Besides, Max says you've gotten a lot uh... better is the word she used. Better since you became a dad. I think you just grew up. Like the rest of us, you know? It doesn't seem fair to not give you a chance if you're trying. Besides... I would never, ever use something like that to hurt someone. I don't want to hurt anyone at all, but... especially not like that."

Billy's lips part slightly. "What are you trying to tell me, kid?"

Will takes the cigarette from Billy and takes a long, slow pull off of it. "Just that I think it's kind of funny we both chose to hide in the closet."

He's so fucking brave.

Billy takes the cigarette back. "You shouldn't smoke," he says. "These things'll kill you."

"After what I've seen, I'm not afraid of cigarettes," Will laughs, "but I will try."

"What have you seen?"

"It's not a story for today. Maybe some other time. I'll always think about it, but for now, I don't want to uh... talk about it. Some stuff... it's just too heavy sometimes."

"I get it," Billy says, and he does, though he feels pathetic. He doesn't know what Will's dealt with, but Billy thinks it's got to be something worse than his dad being mean to him.

They pass the cigarette back and forth, watching the party continue without them. The silence this time is companionable.

"I don't wanna tell you what to do," Will says after some time, when the cigarette is whittled down to almost nothing, "but... I'm just saying that if you decided to uh... tell Steve. You know, how you like his cologne. He might tell you that he likes yours too."

Billy looks at Will, but Will isn't looking at him. He's looking at Mike and Jane. He looks sad.

It's in that moment that Katie drops her s'more on the ground by mistake, and when she goes to pick it up and eat it anyway, Steve tells her no... and she goes into a full-on *meltdown* .

Billy jumps to his feet and leaves Will with the cigarette on the step. He gathers her in his arms and tries to calm her down, but shushing isn't working, and when he offers to make her another one, she uses the Flawless Kid Logic of, "I don't want another one, I want *that one* !"

He thinks fast. "Steve," he says, handing Katie over to him. He takes her without complaint.

Billy goes to where Lucas and Dustin are sitting with the guitar. "Hey, shitbirds, can I borrow that?" he asks. They stare at him. "Please?" he tacks on. Lucas hands it over.

"Don't break it," he says, like Billy's going to take it and smash it.

"Why would you care if I did? Neither of you know how to play," he says, grinning.

"Oh, and you do?" Dustin counters.

"Actually, yeah. I do," Billy says and goes back to where Steve is desperately trying to console Katie. Billy knows what her real problem is. The s'more just wracked the reaction out of her, but really she's just tired. When she's tired and too fired up to sleep, he knows how to calm her down.

He sits down and starts playing the intro. He's a little rusty on the guitar, hasn't played since he was back in California, but he's listened to this song enough times now that he imagines he could play it in his sleep.

" *Spent my days with a woman unkind, smoke my stuff and drank all my wine ,* " he sings. " *Made up my mind to make a new start, going to California with an aching in my heart ...* "

Katie's screaming calms into sniffles, and suddenly she's just watching him.

Everyone is watching him.

Billy glances at Steve's face, Steve with the dandelion crown and soft eyes. His heart flip-flops in his chest.

" Someone told me there's a girl out there, with love in her eyes and flowers in her hair ."

During the interlude, Max approaches, sits next to him, and suddenly she's... singing with him. *" Took my chances on a big jet plane, never let them tell you they're all the same... "*

Billy's always considered himself an alright singer, but Max is fucking incredible . He didn't know. He realizes he probably doesn't know a lot of things about her.

" The sea was red, and the sky was gray, wondered how tomorrow could ever follow today... "

Max looks at him, harmonizing as if they rehearsed it. She seems... impressed by him too. He's never really sought her approval, but the feeling of it makes him feel lighter than he expects. He's never considered himself good at anything-- he's serviceable at being a dad at best, and he's alright at working on cars, but suddenly he feels... good .

The smile on his face feels brand new, an expression he's not sure he's had before.

" Seems like the wrath of the Gods got a punch on the nose and it started to flow, I think I might be sinking... Throw me a line if I reach it in time, I'll meet you up there where the path runs straight and high... "

Steve is watching from Billy's other side, Katie in his lap, already falling asleep. Hannah plops down in front of him, big brown eyes practically glittering in the firelight.

" To find a queen without a king, they say she plays guitar and cries... and sings... "

“ *Lalalala* ,” sings Hannah. Billy doesn’t have to look at Steve to know he’s smiling warmly. Billy can feel it radiate off of him the way it always does when he’s happy. He’s like goddamn sunshine. Not Indiana sunshine, either. California sunshine. The kind that makes Billy feel like he’s back at the beach with the waves lapping at his feet, the kind that gives him peace that he can’t find anywhere else.

When he left California the first time, he never thought he’d find that feeling in Hawkins, but he’s somehow found it with Steve.

God, he’s toeing that line.

“ *Standing on a hill in my mountain of dreams, trying to tell myself it’s not as hard, hard, hard as it seems...* ”

The song comes to an end, and there’s a smattering of applause. Billy looks at Max, and she’s flushed and thrilled over the attention, though she seems just as confused with what to do with it as he is.

“You’re fucking amazing,” Billy says to her, and her eyes get ever brighter, her confusion stronger. “Where’d you learn that song?”

“I rode in your car to and from school practically every day. You think I didn’t learn the lyrics to Led Zeppelin?”

That new smile spreads on Billy’s face again, but it’s an emotion he thinks he can get used to wearing.

Steve gets up and carries Katie into the house to lay her down, and Billy watches him go, watches him pass by Will who is still sitting on the step. His eyes trail between Steve and Billy just like his mother’s did earlier. Billy swallows hard and looks away.

Max has Hannah’s undivided attention now. “Ms. Max, can you teach me how to sing like that?” she asks.

“You are really good,” Lucas says as he approaches, looking sheepish, “but I mean... I already knew that.”

Max looks up at him, and she smiles. Lucas smiles back at her.

Billy... goes a little crazy.

He hands off the guitar to Lucas and goes inside. No one seems to think anything of it.

He goes through the empty house until he finds Steve in what he assumes is Joyce's room. He's put Katie in her bed, and Billy finds him actually tucking hair behind her little ear, like she's his, like he loves her, and fuck, Billy's crazy, he's fucking *losing it* .

Steve looks up, eyes searching Billy's face for what's wrong. He crosses to the doorway and is about to ask, when Billy grabs him by the front of his shirt and swings him around, shoving him against the hallway wall. He smashes their lips together and it feels like he's alive again for the first time in weeks and weeks.

Steve melts into it, kissing him back without a moment's hesitation, practically going weak at the knees when their tongues slide together. Billy's hands hold onto Steve's hips to keep him upright, and Steve just pulls him closer, pressing their bodies flush together. God, it's *good* . Steve's already a hell of a kisser but getting the craving he's been longing for is so fucking *perfect* . It's better than the cigarette he'd had outside.

They part only for air, and Steve is pink in the face, his pupils blown, his glasses slightly crooked. He already looks *wrecked* and Billy's barely put his hands on him.

His hands...

Reality drenches Billy in the ice-cold reminder of what he'd done to Steve the last time they were in this house. He remembers what his brutal hands have been capable of, remembers *the line* , the line that *he just crossed* , and he's sane again. He's sane, and he's... *terrified* .

Steve reaches up, takes Billy's face in his hands. "Hey," he says, "it's okay."

It isn't. Billy knows it isn't, and he knows Steve knows. That's probably why Steve doesn't fight him when Billy says, "I have to go."

He's still standing against the wall when Billy comes back out of the room with Katie still asleep in his arms. Billy can't look at him

because he's not sure he'd be able to stop himself if he does.

All he can hear in his head are the same words repeating over and over and over again.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He's a coward.

He's a coward who doesn't deserve Steve Harrington.

2. Chapter 2

It's six a.m.

Steve knows this because that's exactly what the clock on the microwave says from where he's sitting at the kitchen table, sipping at his coffee. He also knows this because he's been up since four after a fitful night of sleep and has literally watched the minutes tick by, first by his alarm clock upstairs, and now by the microwave clock. Six a.m. was at least a slightly more reasonable time to have his morning coffee. Loads of people get up at six, he thinks. Sure, those people may not have spent the night having nightmares about flower-faced monsters ripping apart their loved ones, but he takes whatever idea of normal that he can get.

He stares out the patio door at the purpling morning that's crawling in. He can't afford to be dealing with his nightmares today. The whole gang is reconvening at the Byers' house, and he'd rather not be jumpy and miserable for the entirety of it. He doesn't want to be a zombie either, so he's on his second cup of coffee. So far it's helping.

He would've thought the dreams wouldn't have left him so shaken up after ten years of them, but they seem to keep finding ways to torture him in new and exciting ways. The ones involving Hannah have always been the worst, but recently they've been featuring Billy and Katie too, and that's...

He shivers. He doesn't like to think about it.

He knows where it comes from, of course, this sudden influx of Billy in his dreams. Billy's occupying his thoughts a lot in the conscious world, so it only makes sense that he'd be in the unconscious parts too. Steve feels like a fool for it, getting a crush on Billy Hargrove like he's some sort of lovesick teen again. He knows he's guilty of falling in love easily-- not to say he's *in love* -- but this is just *sad*. Is he really so pathetic that he gets feelings for the first person to give him even a smidge of attention?

He doesn't want to answer that question.

He sighs heavily, sips at the coffee. He knows there's no point in dwelling on Billy, but he can't really help himself. He loves a puzzle, and damn if Billy isn't a challenge. Every time Steve inches closer to understanding him, Billy inches himself away... but it's a three inch to two inch scenario. Steve's getting a little closer every time.

And he *wants* ... God, how he wants. To get closer, to reach out, to touch, to--

He shakes his head. He can't get too lost in thought right now, can't start going down paths that are dangerous territory. The thing is, Steve's never had feelings for a man before. He's been attracted to them, rolled around in the proverbial hay with them, but he's never sought out a relationship. The way his heart beats around Billy is weird and new and frankly unexpected. It leaves him a little terrified because his fantasies about Billy aren't sexual (or at least not *only* sexual). He daydreams about sharing a home with him, having coffee in the mornings, playing with their daughters at the park. It's so *domestic* ... wanting not just sex but a *life* with Billy Hargrove.

Yeah, unexpected doesn't even begin to cover what he's dealing with right now.

He tries to chalk it up to missing the life he'd tried to build with Colleen, the one that he'd never been able to quite make work. They'd done those things together, he and his ex-wife, and he'd always played like it felt right, but it never quite did. Something always felt closed off, like there was a wall sitting in the middle of the breakfast table between them... Ultimately, he knows that he's the one who built that wall. There were parts of him that he didn't feel safe sharing with Colleen, and he'd thought that giving her most of him was enough, but that was just him being foolish and selfish too. Who was he to think he deserved all of her when he couldn't give it right back?

He's not really sure what he's expecting from Billy, of course, since Billy is too cautious to give him more than a few pieces of himself. Maybe Steve really is just a glutton for punishment.

He sags a little in his seat. He's so *tired* . He just wants one thing in his life to be easy. He never thought all those years ago that he'd be

sitting here, still suffering nightmares, divorced with a kid, and with a crush on Billy fucking Hargrove.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he whispers to himself softly and closes his eyes for just a moment.

“ *Jesus !*”

Steve jolts, lifting his head off the table to find Dustin standing in the doorway of the kitchen, his right hand planted dramatically over his chest. “You scared the shit out of me,” Dustin hisses.

Dustin chose to stay at Steve’s rather than his mother’s while he’s back in Hawkins. He’d come up with a fake cat allergy to get out of holing up in his old room (since his old bedroom has largely become a Cat Room since he moved out), but he explained to Steve that she’s just too *dramatic* . Steve thinks that’s hilarious, honestly, considering Dustin is, well, Dustin, but he supposes the both of them together can be a little much. He’s got a guest room anyway. Dustin spent the night before watching movies with Hannah and then recreating her favorite scenes (Steve thinks Dustin’s Patrick Swayze is better than his just from acting experience), and Steve had gotten a break from being a dad for a few hours.

He hated every second of it.

A Steve that isn’t busy being a dad is a Steve that’s alone with his thoughts, and he *hates* it. He thinks that’s probably why he didn’t sleep most of the night. That’s probably why he... was just sleeping on the kitchen table if the little puddle of drool where his head was is any indication.

“Hey,” Steve greets, leaning his cheek onto his fist as casually as possible so it doesn’t look like he’s wiping a line of spit off the side of his face. “Morning.”

“Dude. It’s seven-thirty. On the weekend. What are you even doing already up?” Dustin complains. His hair is sticking up on end, and his eyes are still squinting against the early morning sunshine lilting in through the windows.

"Adults don't sleep all day, Dustin," Steve laughs, sipping at his coffee. He has to hold back a grimace because it's long gone cold. "After a certain amount of years of getting up at a certain time, you can't really stop."

Dustin huffs. "Are you saying *I'm* not an adult?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying," says Steve without missing a beat. Dustin scoffs, but he doesn't argue the point. Instead, he just goes and fixes himself a mug of coffee.

"You were up pretty late," Dustin says instead. "The light was still on in your room when I put Hannah in bed."

Steve shrugs a shoulder. "Couldn't sleep," he says noncommittally. He knows as soon as he says it that it's not going to be a good enough answer for Dustin, who's never been known to mind his own business with anyone, much less Steve.

"You were having nightmares again," Dustin says.

Steve doesn't look at him, doesn't answer.

"Dude," Dustin says more gently, sliding into the chair next to Steve at the table. "You said you were going to talk about this."

"I don't recall ever saying that," Steve says flatly. "Pretty sure I just said I was going to deal with it. It's-- it's not that big of a deal, alright? A couple of bad dreams. So what?"

"So what?" Dustin says, "So you suffer, that's what. We want to help. I already told you that you don't have to do all of this by yourself."

Steve scrubs his hands over his face under his glasses. "I'm not suffering. Don't be so dramatic. Some sporadic nightmares over ten years is not something to worry you guys about. You've all got much bigger problems than my dreams being a little scary."

Dustin looks like he wants to argue about that, looks like it physically pains him not to... but Steve knows that Dustin knows when there's no point. They can sit here all morning and argue about how bad Steve's dreams are, or they can move on to other subjects.

When Dustin speaks again, Steve kind of wishes Dustin had chosen to argue.

“So. How’s things with Billy?”

Steve groans. “They’re *fine*,” he grumbles, not wanting to open that can of worms. “We’re still just friends before you start asking. I haven’t seen much of him lately.”

Because I’ve been avoiding him goes unsaid, but he might as well have confessed because Dustin reads it between the lines of his words anyway.

“I knew I was right about you liking him. You’re super obvious, Steve.”

“I know,” Steve sighs miserably. He gives up on pretending his coffee is any good and gets up to fix another cup, dumping the old in the sink. “I know how pathetic I am, thanks.”

“It’s not pathetic. You can’t help who you like. I mean, would I have picked someone different? Absolutely, but like... it’s your life.”

“It is pathetic,” Steve replies and he can’t help but think that here they are, arguing anyway. “Liking someone who doesn’t like you back is pathetic.”

He doesn’t mean for it to touch a nerve in Dustin, but it does anyway. He sometimes forgets about the awkward boy that still exists inside the man Dustin’s become, the boy who struggled to get dates to dances and got called a loser. “Sorry,” he says when Dustin winces. “I didn’t... I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just... a weird thing. When you’re almost thirty. Like you feel like... you’re too old to be getting crushes.”

“Thirty is not that old,” Dustin offers. “Anytime I tease you about your age, that’s all it is. Teasing... and besides all that, seemed to *me* like he was kind of into you.”

“He isn’t,” Steve assures, even though he knows that’s not the whole truth.

"I don't know, Steve, I'm pretty sure he is . Like, have you asked him?"

"Of course I haven't asked him! And I'm not going to!" Steve says, aghast. "The two of us are never gonna be a thing, alright? And that's *fine* because like, I don't *need* a relationship to make me feel complete. I'm perfectly content with just me and Hannah and my friends. There's no reason to get into a whole complicated sort of mess just because some guy is a good kisser."

"You *kissed* him?" Dustin asks, eyebrows shooting up. Ah, fuck.

"No! Yes... I... well, he kissed me. On Parents' Day. That was before I knew I liked him."

"So, you're telling me that he kissed you, but you still don't think he likes you back?"

"Well, it sounds stupid when you put it like that."

"Yeah, stupid things sound stupid when they're said out loud, Steve."

"It's *not* stupid," Steve stresses, then runs his hands through his hair. "Okay. Look. It's... complicated. Even if he was attracted to me, it's never gonna happen between us because... because..."

"Because he's Billy Hargrove and he won't get his head out of his own ass?" Dustin guesses.

"Yeah. That."

Dustin sits back in his chair, slurping loudly at his coffee. "It's weird. Never would've thought Billy would like dudes. Wasn't he like banging every girl in the high school back then?"

Steve doesn't like the way that thought makes his stomach curdle with jealousy. There's no reason for it. "I don't pretend to understand what Billy likes and doesn't like," he says, and said jealousy makes sure to tack on, "but apparently he had the hots for me back then."

"And so he... beat the crap out of you? Seems like one way to show your feelings."

“Dustin, think about the world we’re living in, alright? What it was like *back then* . I mean, Christ, it was the 1980’s in small town Hawkins. Can you imagine the shit he would have gotten if people knew? And me too. I don’t even tell people *now* that I’m bisexual.”

“So, is that what Billy is? Bisexual?”

“I’m telling you, I don’t *know* . It’s... it’s really very possible he’s just confused, or something. He’s dealt with a lot of shit. He’s *dealing* with a lot of shit. That’s why it’s complicated.”

He slumps forward, sighing. He’s exhausted and wants to crawl back into bed, but he doesn’t think there’s much point now. He really is tempted to try and get out of this get together, but he doubts Dustin will allow it. Steve knows ultimately that Dustin’s the one that’s right.

He can’t close up and hide with his feelings.

...or at least, not all of them.

--

Steve’s hit with a pang of guilt when he pulls up outside of Joyce’s house. Dustin isn’t the only person he’s been keeping at arm’s length, he knows, but he doesn’t have the excuse of distance with Joyce. She meets them at the door when he turns the car off though, and she doesn’t look annoyed. She smiles warmly, like how he always wished his mom would smile at him, and she envelops him in a hug when he gets close, standing on her tiptoes to reach.

“Hey, boys,” she greets, then smiles down at Hannah, “and the lovely lady as well, of course.”

Hannah grins up at her and steps inside with Dustin at her heels. Steve can hear the voices inside instantly perk up with excitement. It’s Will and Jonathan and Nancy. It doesn’t appear Mike, Lucas, or Max have arrived yet.

Steve lingers outside for a moment, yawning against the morning. Joyce stays right there with him, arms folded around herself to keep her little frame warm. “How have you been?” she asks. “Haven’t

heard from you in a bit.”

“Not since I first moved back,” Steve admits awkwardly. Joyce had been the first person he’d gone to once he got back to Hawkins, and it had only been because he was desperate. He didn’t know how to handle the divorce, and he couldn’t go to his own parents for advice, so he’d asked for her to come over for lunch while Hannah was at school, and he’d basically just sat at the kitchen table and cried like an idiot. She’d placed her hand between his shoulder blades and told him he wasn’t a failure just because things didn’t work out, but he wasn’t sure he believed her. He still isn’t sure he does, though he appreciated the gesture. It just felt too embarrassing to talk to her after that. He’d shared too much of himself, had burdened her with his feelings, and honestly, what even was she to him? His ex-girlfriend’s husband’s mom. Even now he’s blushing over it, looking at the yard rather than at her.

“You look good,” Joyce says, touching his arm. “The glasses are really becoming on you.”

He can’t help but look at her then. “You don’t think they look stupid?”

“Oh, *no*,” she says, shaking her head, and she seems like she means it. “They make you look smart. Like a sexy sort of smart.” She nudges him with her elbow playfully.

Steve rolls his eyes but he’s smiling when he does it.

“Hannah looks good too,” she says. “She’s growing up so fast.”

“God, she is,” Steve sighs, chuckling a little. “It’s like I blinked and she’s taller. I’m afraid to close my eyes.”

Joyce nods, lighting up a cigarette. “It doesn’t slow down at all either. Trust me. I’m still adjusting to the fact that I’m going to be a grandmother.”

Steve considers going inside after that, but he finds himself lingering. The scent of Joyce’s cigarette kind of reminds him of Billy, and it relaxes him some. He reaches out and squeezes Joyce’s shoulder and

says, "If Hannah is half the person Will or Jonathan ended up being, I'll know I did a good job."

"Oh, honey," she says, wrapping an arm around his waist in a side hug. "You're already doing a *great* job. I just hope you're still taking some time for yourself when you can. Are you seeing anyone?"

"No, uh... no." He shakes his head. He kind of wants to take a drag off of that cigarette too. "I'm not a complete hermit though, at least, so that's something. Went ice skating with Hannah and Dustin in the city. Brought along her best friend and her dad."

"That was nice of you," Joyce says, "inviting them along."

"They'd never been. Hannah's friend Katie got the hang of it pretty quick, but her dad struggled a little." He feels the smile spread across his face at the memory of it. Joyce is watching him curiously, so he quickly tries to steal his expression, but he's never been very good at that. "It was a lot of fun. We hadn't been there since we moved. I know it's been hard on Hannah, but Katie's made it so much easier. I'm really grateful they have each other."

"Sounds like Katie's a sweet girl."

"I don't know if *sweet* is quite the right word," Steve admits, "but she's... she's a really good kid. Fiery and loyal and so good. She cares about Hannah a lot. She stands up for her when I'm not there. She's already been through so much, but she never gives up. That's important stuff that Hannah can learn from her."

Steve's heart squeezes. He isn't sure why.

"You should have invited her," Joyce says, "her and her dad."

"I don't... I don't know if they'd want to be involved in this. There's a lot of stuff here, y'know? Stuff they wouldn't know about."

"Well," she says, "feel free to invite them over some other time. I'd like to meet them."

He doesn't know what to say to that, so he just nods.

Mike and Lucas show up shortly after Steve makes it inside, and by that point the living room gets too loud with the sound of Dungeons and Dragons. Steve never has been able to follow the game, so he escapes into the kitchen where Jonathan and Nancy are and settles in at the table with them.

Steve talks to them on the phone on occasion, mostly because Nancy calls him. Despite the distance from Hawkins to New York, they've remained his closest (and only) friends his own age up until Billy rolled back into town. It's easier for him to talk to them because of that distance, actually. He doesn't have to look them in the face after he admits something embarrassing. Besides, Nancy has always been easy for him to talk to. He thinks there will always be a small part of him that's in love with her.

That doesn't mean, however, that he's told them he's got a crush on Billy. He's told them they've been hanging out, sure, but some information was best left kept to himself.

They chat at the table for a little while, Steve mostly listening. Jonathan's photography career has been taking off, and Nancy's working as a lawyer. They're expecting their first child in about four months. They've decided not to find out the gender so that it can be a surprise, and they still haven't decided on names. It's weird to sit there and hear about how their lives have beautifully unfolded, to see the way they smile at each other without even realizing it. He thinks it's funny how that could have been him by Nancy's side at one time. He doesn't think he could have ultimately made her happy though. He couldn't make his ex-wife happy either.

Everyone leaves eventually.

...He can't focus on that right now. Today is supposed to be a day of joy. All of these people have come together, a found family who survived a brush with Hell, and they are *okay*. Everyone is *alright*.

Steve turns the conversation towards Jonathan's pictures, and Jonathan ends up dragging out his portfolio with Nancy's insistence. The photographs inside truly are something special. Steve's never had

much of an artist's eye, but he can appreciate it as a spectator. He doesn't know *why* it works, but he knows it does work. Jonathan tends to take photos of landscapes a lot of the time, at least for his personal collection, but it really is his pieces with people in them that shine. He captures them, holds them in the photo, frozen as who they were in just that exact moment. Steve feels like he knows the strangers looking back at him. It's quite captivating.

Joyce starts cooking breakfast, filling the kitchen with noise and delicious smells. Steve prefers it to the quiet of morning. It makes him feel more alive and less alone. He can't help but think about how he could have brought Colleen to this if they'd still been together, how he could have shared with her what he'd experienced, but he didn't.

"I've got to get you to take some pictures of Hannah," Steve tells Jonathan, silencing his thoughts with words of a different nature.

"Sure, absolutely," Jonathan says. "We'll be in town for a few days. I can come over and take some shots."

"How much are they?"

"If I can put them in my portfolio, that's fine."

Steve's gaze softens a little, and he knows this is why Nancy picked Jonathan over him. He's so kind, yes, but he's open as well. Steve always felt like he was playing a part in a show, a part where he had to be the dashing hero. Jonathan's good at doing it naturally. Steve thinks he's gotten better at it too, but Nancy deserves someone who doesn't have to try so hard.

Nancy, astute as she is, seems to notice the war waging in Steve's brain (she always had been good at noticing it), so she directs his gaze back to the book. "This one's my favorite," she says, pointing at a photo of a couple in Central Park. "It's a couple of friends of ours. They got a blown up copy on canvas for their apartment."

"It's beautiful," Steve says, looking at the black and white photograph. It's two women sitting on the grass, their hands entwined. They don't appear to have noticed the picture being taken

because they're so busy looking at each other, their foreheads pressed together as they laugh.

Steve *aches* .

Something shifts out of the corner of Steve's eye, and he glances up in that moment and--

It's Billy.

Holy fucking shit, it's *Billy* .

"Hey," he says, a little breathless because what the fuck is Billy doing here? Steve wonders if he somehow magicked him up from his imagination, but that can't be it. Steve knows that impossible things happen in Hawkins, but not *that* impossible.

"Hey," Billy says right back. He keeps looking at the sink.

Steve's floundering for something to say. Jonathan and Nancy are staring at Billy too, and he knows they're expecting some sort of explanation.

Thankfully, Joyce comes to the rescue. She acts like she didn't see him come in and plasters on a smile. "Oh!" she says. "I thought you were Hopper at first. Have we met before?"

"That's Billy Hargrove," Jonathan says, throwing out any sort of hope that he and Nancy might not have recognized him.

"He--" Nancy starts, always the one to try and repair a situation when it starts to crumble, but it's not her situation to fix.

"He's a friend of mine," Steve says. "I invited him."

Everyone looks at Steve, but Steve only has eyes for Billy. He hopes that Billy can read the *just play along* he's mentally sending his way. He hopes and hopes and... Billy's shoulders relax, and he turns back to Joyce, and he's smiling like a dream. "Our daughters play together," Billy says, and Steve curses his heart for leaping at the sight of him being charming. "They're basically inseparable."

"I've heard," she says, smiling back. "Steve has told me all about Katie, and Hop's told me about you too."

This is a curve ball Steve hadn't anticipated. He supposes it makes sense for her to assume that this is the same friend Steve told her about outside, but he didn't realize she'd talked to Hopper about his new employee and would connect the dots on the name. Billy looks concerned about this too, but Joyce never falters, adding, "he says you're a hard worker down at the station and not afraid to do a little heavy lifting."

"Uh-- I um, y-yeah." Billy is actually *flustered*. God, it shouldn't actually be *cute*, but it fucking is, and Steve can't help but smile.

Joyce introduces herself and shakes Billy's hand, and Steve for one is shocked Billy doesn't go whole haul and try and kiss the top of her hand. Maybe he's just too nervous. He's clearly a wreck, after all. Steve can feel it radiating off of him, even if it's not immediately apparent on his face.

When he sits, he looks at Steve as if for guidance, but Steve isn't really prepared. All he can really do is stare back at him.

Again, Nancy tries to repair the situation. This time Steve lets her. "How have you been?" she asks with a smile like they are friends, even though they aren't. Steve's told her that he's changed, but he's not sure how much she believes him.

"Um... fine," says Billy.

"Didn't think you'd come back to Hawkins," Jonathan says, repeating a sentiment Steve is pretty sure he himself had said to Jonathan when he first told them Billy was back.

"Funny how things work out," Billy says, voice a touch softer. He's lounging in his chair with one leg folded over the other, the picture of relaxed, but Steve can see how forced it is. It makes him want to reach out and touch, to soothe, but he can't, and he won't. "Where are you staying at these days, Byers?"

"New York. I went to school there and it's just kind of home for us

now.”

Billy stares at Jonathan and Nancy’s hands. Then he stares at Steve’s hands on the table. It makes Steve’s fingertips itch. Steve completely loses track of the conversation until a mug of coffee is set down in front of Billy and Billy wraps his hands around the cup. It’s only in that moment that Steve realizes he’s been staring at Billy’s hands too, but he doesn’t have time to dwell on it because then Billy asks, “what’s with this meeting anyway? How does everyone know each other?”

All eyes are back on Steve, and he’s sweating, oh God, he’s sweating. No one wants to say anything because they don’t know how much Billy knows, so Steve does the best he can to smooth talk his way through it. “Small towns, you know? You kind of make your family. Since all the kids were always going all over the place, we all ended up uh... becoming closer friends, all of us.”

Steve’s not as smooth as he once was. Billy looks skeptical as hell...

...but he says, “Makes sense,” and nods and everyone is just okay with that, so Steve is too.

It’s good enough. For now.

--

Hopper gets there just as breakfast is being finished, like he followed the scent there. Up until that point it’s been casual conversation between Billy, Jonathan, Nancy, and himself, but Steve’s gone back to listening for the most part. Nancy keeps meeting his eyes across the table, trying to have a silent conversation with him about Billy, but he’s not having it right now (or ever). He both hates and loves that she can still read him so well after all these years.

The way Hopper smiles at Joyce gets Billy’s attention. He looks at Steve for confirmation, wagging his finger towards the two of them with his eyebrows up, but Steve can’t really say for sure. Everyone in town knows the two of them have been dancing around each other for practically their whole lives, but if they’ve been hooking up in the last ten years, they certainly haven’t been telling anyone.

Joyce hands Hopper a plate as she asks if Jane is coming, and Hopper immediately sets it aside so he can help her fix everyone else's plate.

Steve's relatively certain they've got something going on. He can understand the desire for privacy though, so he's not going to ask.

"She's hard to keep in touch with, but I want to say that her answer was yes. I'm not sure where she's coming from this week. Last week she was in Louisiana but that's the last I heard from her."

"Well, I've made plenty of Eggos for her. Hopefully she's not running too far behind."

Hopper turns then, meeting Billy's gaze with a curt, "Hargrove," in greeting. "Didn't expect to see you here, but I assumed you would be when I saw your car out front."

"Seems I'm just the big surprise nobody wants," Billy jokes, grinning widely. Steve *aches* .

"Oh, hush. You're just as bad as Steve," Joyce says.

Steve flinches. Billy's eyebrow raises. "Oh, am I?" he asks. "In what way?"

Joyce gives Billy a plate, but she's looking at Steve when she says it. "The self-deprecation. There's too much negativity. I think I'm gonna ban it in my house. Besides, you two boys are much more handsome when you smile." She winks. Steve kind of melts a little. Even years later it seems there's still the young boy looking for mother's attention inside of him, and Joyce at least attempts to fill that need. When he looks at Billy, Billy just looks slightly charmed and slightly confused, like he's not sure why she would compliment the both of them. His gaze is far away, trying to grasp at something far back into his memory, something he misses, something he can't have.

Hopper seems to see it at the same time that Steve does, so he interrupts the thought before it is allowed to get sad. "Handsome is nice but useful is better. Why don't you kids help distribute breakfast, huh?"

Steve takes a couple of plates out to Hannah and Dustin, then goes

back for more. As he hands over plates to Mike and Lucas, the front door opens.

It's Eleven-- err... *Jane* . Steve hasn't seen her in years. Last he'd heard, she'd packed up a car and started making a trip around the country, looking for her 'sisters' and wiping out any labs that existed that did experiments on people like her. She travels alone, despite Mike's desire to go with her and Hopper's desire for her not to go at all, but no one tells her what to do anymore. They're wasting their breath if they try.

She stands there in her leather jacket with her hair cropped short, and the whole room is captivated by her. It's not even her powers (though Steve still isn't entirely certain how those powers work even years later); she is just such a commanding presence that no one can help but stare.

"El!" Mike cries, going to her instantly, leaving his plate haphazardly on the edge of the coffee table. Will carefully moves it so it won't dump onto the carpet. Mike hugs her as if it's the only thing he's ever been meant to do, and she holds him right back and breathes out his name like it's the only word she's ever been meant to say.

Steve finds his gaze torn from them however, finds his eyes lingering on Billy who's just watching them, just staring and looking so lost, so... alone.

He sidles up next to him and whispers, "That's Jane," hoping to distract him from whatever unpleasant feelings Billy's experiencing at the sight of them together.

Billy's eyes follow her as she crosses the room, and his expression softens slightly into a more wondrous state. "She's fucking unreal," he whispers.

Steve nearly laughs. "You have no idea."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Billy asks turning to look at him, blue eyes glittering. Steve feels a little giddy just having him look at him like that with a ghost of a smile on his lips. He's so fucking pretty, Steve thinks. He *wants* ...

Mistake, mistake, mistake, he tells himself, quickly excusing himself to go and lecture the no-longer-children about behaving like they're still kids. "Hey, hey, hey," he complains, clapping his hands together to get their attention. "Don't just leave all this food on the floor, you animals. Joyce cooks all of you breakfast and this is how you react? Honestly!"

He's kind of impressed with his ability to command authority. He looks up, back at Billy, feeling the urge to make a teasing comment, but Billy's talking to Joyce and... he can't interrupt. They're talking too low for Steve to hear it, but Billy looks lost again, his eyes watery and his smile sad. Steve can't even bear to look, so he turns away and does his best to ignore the ache in his chest.

--

After breakfast, Hannah and Katie convince everyone to join them in a game of Hide and Seek because Dungeons and Dragons is "boring" (their words, not his). Steve finds himself under Jonathan's old bed, listening to the soft chaos of everyone trying to find a place to take shelter in. Hannah is "It" and he can hear her sweet voice counting loudly from the kitchen table which Katie deemed as "Base".

The silence is kind of nice after all of the noise of the house, but it also kind of feels like it did that morning before Dustin woke up. The creeping vines of his nightmares like to make themselves known in the silence, which is why Steve thinks he always wants to keep himself busy. The benefits of having a five-year-old is that it's almost never quiet.

Suddenly, he's joined by a five-year-old, but it's not *his* five-year-old. Katie's little feet appear in his vision and then she's scooching under the bed with him, grinning with all her teeth and her tongue briefly pressed between them. "Hey, Harrington," she greets. She's so much like Billy it still leaves Steve in awe sometimes.

"Hey," Steve says awkwardly. "Um. Katie, what are you doing here?"

"I'm hiding," she says. She folds her arms in front of her, mirroring Steve's position, though she fits under the bed much better than he does. "I can hide with you, can't I?"

Steve knows it's not an accusation, but it still kind of feels like one. "Of course you can," he says. She smiles at him. He offers a small smile back. They're quiet for a minute.

It turns out, Katie's also like Billy in that, to find out what they want, all Steve has to do is wait.

"What happened to Hannah's mom?" Katie asks, voice smaller.

"She..." he hesitates, then shoves on because he'd rather not upset her. "She lives in the city. She has a house there."

"Did you and Hannah live there too?"

"No. We had a different house when we lived together."

Katie's quiet again, her legs kicking behind her. Then, "does Hannah get to see her?"

Steve's heart clenches. It's suddenly very hard to talk. "Yeah, um... Hannah will go stay with her mom during the summer. It's not really far though, uh... I'm sure Colleen wouldn't mind having you come and stay some too."

Katie nods, then settles her chin on top of her hands. "I can't see my mom," she mumbles.

Steve's eyes feel wet. He blinks it away. He waits.

"Dad says she's sick... I wanna see her especially if she's sick because maybe I could help make her feel better... but I don't think she's really sick. She's just..."

Katie doesn't have the vocabulary for it. He can see her struggling, can see when it gets too much.

"Maybe," she says, looking at Steve, "Hannah's mom could marry my dad, and then she could be my mom too."

Steve settles his hand on her back, laughing a little. "I don't know if Colleen's really your dad's type, Katie."

She squints her eyes, then says, “Well, maybe he should just marry you then.”

Steve momentarily forgets to breathe. And speak. “I-- that’s-- wh... no, I mean-- we can’t, Katie.”

“Why not?”

Steve really isn’t prepared to talk about this, especially with someone else’s kid, but here he is. “Well, for starters, it’s not legal for two men to get married.”

“Why?”

“Some people don’t like it.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

She sits, thinks. “Why is Hannah’s mom gone?”

“It’s... complicated.”

“How complicated?”

“It’s-- look, uh... sometimes... Mommies and Daddies care very much about each other but decide they’d be better apart.”

She blinks. “That’s not that complicated.”

Steve thinks it really isn’t, honestly.

Katie smiles, proud of herself. It only lasts a moment though, and then it fades. “Are my Mom and Dad better apart?” she asks.

Steve meets her gaze. She stares right back at him. “I can’t answer that,” Steve tells her because it’s all he can say. “Do you think that they are?”

“Dad is,” she says. “I don’t... really remember what Mom’s like.”

Steve’s heart breaks. She says it so casually, like it doesn’t bother her.

He knows from her tantrums that it absolutely does.

“Dad is good without Mom,” she says, pauses, thinks. “He’s gotten lots better since he got you as a friend. He smiles a lot more, and he’s nicer. He doesn’t look so sad all the time because he’s not always by himself. I don’t like to be by myself either... back in California, I was by myself lots.”

“Really?” Steve questions, trying not to focus on his own influence and the way it makes him want to vibrate out of his skin. It’s overwhelming, knowing that he’s been at all helpful, even if that’s exactly what he’s been trying to do.

“Yeah,” she says. “I didn’t have friends... but now I’ve got Hannah, so it’s okay. If I got her, I don’t need anybody else. All my other friends are just bonus.”

She leans her head against Steve’s arm. “I like having you too, Harrington. You’re pretty cool for a grown-up.”

“I think you’re pretty cool too, Katie,” Steve says, wrapping an arm around her as best as he can in the tight space. “If you ever need anything, all you have to do is ask.”

“Just keep making Dad happy. I can take care of myself.”

Oh, Steve is fucked.

He’s even more fucked than he realized.

God, he loves her.

Fuck.

--

The evening starts winding down. Steve feels like the day has flown by and he’s exhausted, but he still helps put together the fire pit. The girls are drooping a bit too, Katie in particular, so Steve’s sitting in the grass with them, watching them make flower crowns out of the dandelions in the yard. Hannah sets one on top of his head and kisses his cheek. “You look pretty, Daddy,” she says joyously.

"I feel pretty," he says back, smiling. "Thank you. Why don't you make one for yourself so we can match?"

"I'm making one for her," Katie interrupts, fingers carefully tying the flowers together.

"Alright, well why don't we let Hannah make one for you then? Then we can all match."

Katie smiles, satisfied with that answer.

Dustin comes bounding out of the house with an acoustic guitar, shouting across the yard at Jonathan, asking, "Can we borrow this?" Jonathan clearly hasn't seen the guitar since he lived there. Steve's not entirely sure he even remembers owning it.

"Uh, sure," he says slowly. "Knock yourself out."

"Do you even know how to play, man?" Lucas asks.

"I've been learning," Dustin provides as an answer rather than a yes or no. "I can teach you a thing or two, Lucas, guarantee it. You know, chicks dig guys who play guitar."

"Says the single guy," Lucas says flatly.

"Aren't you technically single right now too?"

They both look towards the house just as Max comes out the back door, carrying the makings for s'mores. Lucas stares after her longingly and says, "No, man. I'm not."

"Then let me learn to play," Dustin says, sitting down with the guitar and fumbling through some chords.

Steve has no idea what's going on between Max and Lucas. He can't keep up with all of these relationships, so he thinks it's best to stay out of it. Being already once-divorced, he doesn't feel like he is the best person to go to when it comes to relationships anyway. He offers a smile to Max when she approaches and offers to help with the s'mores.

“Sure,” she says, looking slightly sheepish. She’s been kind of tiptoeing around him all day, similar to the way Billy’s been. He glances over at Billy who’s sitting on the step, staring off into space and looking kind of miserable.

“Can I ask you something?”

Steve jolts, looks back at Max who is putting marshmallows on a skewer. She doesn’t wait for him to answer before she continues. “Are you the reason he’s... different?”

“Who?”

“You know who,” she mumbles.

Steve hesitates, helps Hannah with her own skewer and tells her to keep back from the fire. When her marshmallow sets on fire, he blows it out for her. Katie doesn’t appear to need any help, expertly preparing herself a s’more and chomping into it, leaving marshmallow goo and a smudge of chocolate at the corners of her mouth.

Finally, he answers. “I don’t think I am. He already seemed pretty different when I reunited with him.”

“Is that why you were nice to him?”

Steve purses his lips, focuses on making himself a s’more rather than looking at her. It’s not like she’s looking at him anyway.

“It... it didn’t seem fair, not to give him a chance,” Steve shrugs. It doesn’t feel like much of an answer.

“He beat the crap out of you.”

“Ten years ago, Max. A lot of stuff can change in ten years or even in like, one year. You know, I was kind of an asshole before I dated Nancy.”

“You can’t say asshole,” Katie interrupts, mouth full.

Max smiles a little, tucking some hair behind her ear. “I doubt you

could possibly be as bad as him.”

“I was pretty terrible,” Steve says with a grin, taking a bite out of his s’more. “A real jerk... but Nancy helped me see what a jerk I was being, and I decided to change. So I did. Maybe I just thought he deserved the same opportunity, y’know?”

“So, you *are* responsible then.”

“No. I think the decision to change is pretty much his own, Max. I can offer a hand all day, but it’s him that has to allow himself to take it.”

He thinks of Billy’s eyes staring at his hands on the table earlier. He thinks of his own hand on top of Billy’s at the McDonald’s.

He’s distracted before he can carry those thoughts much further because Katie drops her half-eaten s’more in the dirt and immediately reaches to pick it back up. Steve jumps up when she moves to put it back in her mouth.

“Katie, *no* ,” he says sternly.

...and all hell breaks loose.

Katie immediately goes into full-tantrum, screaming and crying, and Steve is about to reach out to her when Billy appears next to him out of nowhere and gathers her into his arms. “Hey, come on, now,” Billy says gently, shushes her. “Chill out. It’s okay. We can make you another one.”

“I don’t want another one, I want *that* one!” she sobs, burying her face into Billy’s neck. Steve knows that kind of cry. It’s not about the s’more at all. It’s just that she made it herself, and she’s too tired to do it again.

“Steve,” Billy says and hands Katie over to him. He’s clearly got some sort of plan formulating, so Steve just takes her and cradles her close to him. She holds onto Steve just like she did Billy and just *cries* like her little heart is broken. Hannah sits in the grass with her s’more looking worried, but then her eyes travel back to Billy and curiosity takes center stage on her face.

Billy's grabbed the guitar from Dustin and Lucas. He sits down next to Steve and starts playing without a word... and then he starts to sing.

" Spent my days with a woman unkind, smoked my stuff and drank all my wine... Made up my mind to make a new start, going to California with an aching in my heart... "

Katie instantly calms and so does Steve. He hadn't realized how much chaos had been rolling around in his head until it suddenly stops. Billy's voice is smoky and warm and it makes the hairs on Steve's arms stand up on end. He can't look away.

" Someone told me there's a girl out there with love in her eyes and flowers in her hair. "

He looks at Steve then, and Steve's heart flip-flops.

He's so busy looking back at Billy that he doesn't even realize Max has sat down with them until she joins in on the singing, their voices blending together like they've been doing it for years.

" Took my chances on a big jet plane, never let them tell you they're all the same... The sea was red and the sky was gray, wondered how tomorrow could ever follow today... "

Billy's face cracks into the most brilliant smile Steve's ever seen in his life. It's like sunshine breaking through the darkness, so warm and bright and beautiful that he's momentarily blinded. It's the most beautiful thing Steve's ever witnessed. He's breathless, but he doesn't mind. He could drown in this warmth without complaint.

He also wants to be the one to put that smile on his face.

He's a little selfish like that.

" Seems like the wrath of the Gods got a punch on the nose, and it started to flow, I think I might be sinking...Throw me a line if I reach it in time, I'll meet you up there where the path runs straight and high... "

Katie's dozing, long eyelashes fluttering against her rosy cheeks. Hannah is enchanted by the song, settling in right in front of them,

their number one audience member. Billy probably doesn't even realize how he acknowledges her, nodding his head in her direction with a corner of his mouth turned up playfully, and *God*, he's beautiful. "*To find a queen without a king, they say she plays guitar and cries and sings...*"

"*Lalalala*," sings Hannah. The warmth in Billy floods over and spills out, and Steve can't help but catch some of it. It cuts through the cold loneliness that Steve's grown so accustomed to, and he loves it, he loves...

He loves them.

Right now, the thought doesn't even scare him.

"*Standing on a hill in my mountain of dreams, trying to tell myself it's not as hard, hard, hard as it seems...*"

The song comes to an end, and everyone is applauding. The only reason Steve refrains is because Katie is sleeping so peacefully and he doesn't want to jostle her. All he can do is watch in wonder when Billy turns to Max and says, honestly and earnestly, "You're fucking amazing."

Max's eyes widen. It's probably the first time Billy's ever complimented her, Steve thinks.

"Where did you learn that song?"

"I rode in your car to and from school practically every day. You think I didn't learn the lyrics to Led Zeppelin?"

Billy smiles that same smile again, and it's a little too much for Steve to take. He gets to his feet and carries Katie inside, takes her back to Joyce's bedroom and lays her down on the bed.

For a moment, all he can do is look at her, soft blonde waves of hair curling around her cherubic face. She's more peaceful like this, and Steve can see her beyond the energy and beyond the anger and beyond the confused sadness. She's got a smattering of freckles on her nose. She has Billy's ears.

Steve reaches out and tucks her hair behind one of those ears, smiles at her softly. She truly is so good... He is grateful for her place in Hannah's life and in Billy's life, and he just wishes...

He doesn't get to finish the thought because he looks up to find Billy standing in the doorway, looking disheveled. His mouth is slightly agape, his blue eyes wide and shining. He seems panicked, like he's run into the house just to find them.

"What--" Steve starts to say, but before he can complete the word, Billy's grabbing him by the front of his shirt and hauling him off the bed. Steve momentarily has a flashback to the last time Billy did this and how it ended with him unconscious on the same floor, but then his back is meeting the wall and Billy's lips are meeting his and Steve just... *melts* ...

God, it's everything Steve's been longing for since the first time. Something about Billy's kisses lights up every nerve ending in Steve's body, and it's frankly a miracle he stays standing even with Billy's hands holding him. Steve's arms lace around Billy's neck, and he pulls him closer, desperate for more, more, more contact. Their tongues slide together and it's absolute bliss. Steve can't help but think they're meant for this, to touch like this, to kiss like this. When he's kissing Billy, everything suddenly seems to make sense. Just like when Billy sings, when he kisses Steve the chaos in his head shuts off. It's glorious. It's perfect. It's everything Steve could ever want. It's...

It's over.

Billy pulls away, panting, lips swollen, pupils blown. Steve can literally see it as the darkness seeps back into him, curls unpleasantly around him, and takes hold. It breaks his heart to watch Billy struggle against it, against thoughts, and feelings, and words.

Just like he was back in the car on Parents' Day, Billy is *terrified* .

"Hey," Steve says softly, taking Billy's face in his hands, "it's okay."

You're okay.

He's not here.

You're not who you used to be.

He likes to think he can convince Billy of these things one day. Today is not that day though.

Billy steps back and looks nearly at the brink of tears when he says, "I have to go." Steve doesn't fight him on it, even though he'd like to. He doesn't think it will help the situation, but it most certainly will hurt.

He watches Billy gather Katie up and take her and go. He listens as the Camaro roars to life outside and peels out of the driveway and fades into the distance.

He stands there with his back against the wall, and he thinks *I love him*.

He's so fucked.

Author's Note:

i'm on [tumblr](#).